

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church,
Springfield, Virginia, on Sunday, September 5, 1993, by the
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2 KINGS 3:22-23

"And the sun was shining on the water...and the
Moabites said, 'That's blood!'"

THE ILLUSIONS OF LIFE

It is desperately easy to misinterpret things. In life
we are often tempted to call things adverse or tragic when
in reality they are nothing of the sort.

In our text we have a classic Old Testament example of
misinterpretation. Let me tell you the story. The Moabites
had refused to abide by the terms of a treaty they had made
with Israel. So, King Joram of Israel decided to lower the
boom on them. He solicited the help of Jehoshaphat, King of
Judah, and they prevailed upon the King of Edom to volunteer
his army also as they prepared to battle the Kingdom of
Moab.

Now when the Moabites learned that these three kings
with their combined armies were about to launch an attack
against them, they mobilized their army; and we read that
"every man, young and old, who could bear arms was called up
and stationed on the border" (2 Kings 3:21). They at least
hadn't reached the state of national decline where they were
willing to send their women into combat!

So we find the Moabite army deployed on the bank of a
river, awaiting the onset of an attack by these three kings.
Now this river had its source away up among the red
sandstone hills; and a spring flood is on, and the stream is
discolored. The water looks red because it is carrying down
tons of the sandstone particles. As well as that, the
rising sun is bathing the river in its bright red rays. And
the Moabites, encamped on the bank of the river, leaped to
the conclusion that the water was full of blood! They said,
"Hurrah! The kings have quarrelled among themselves, and
their armies have slaughtered each other. Look at the blood
in the river! We will go now and collect the spoil!"

But they suffered dearly for their mistake; for when
they proceeded up river to raid the camp of their enemies,
they found that those enemies were alive and well, and were
waiting for them, and the combined armies of the three kings
cut the Moabites to shreds.

However, the point I want to underline in the story is
this -- What made the Moabites think that a massacre had
taken place was all caused by the red sandstone particles in
the water, and the rising sun shining upon the water. They
shouted, "That's blood!", when in reality it was not blood

at all. They thought a tragedy had taken place up river when actually their senses had deceived them.

We sometimes make the same mistake. It seems too often that our common lot in life is frustration, disappointment, misfortune, sickness and sorrow. These things come to everyone at one time or another. Trouble is no respecter of persons. But what makes life futile or meaningful is the kind of interpretation we put upon these things. We think of them as something terrible when in reality they may not be terrible at all.

Genius often reveals itself in the way a person interprets a thing. Multitudes of people had seen apples fall from trees. But Sir Isaac Newton saw an apple fall one day; he interpreted that natural phenomenon aright, and discovered the Law of Gravitation. Housewives for centuries had seen the lid of the kettle pop up and down as the water boiled inside, and the steam sought a way of escape. But one day Robert Watt looked upon the spectacle of the water boiling in the kettle; he interpreted it aright; and as a result, built the first steam engine.

It is so easy to misinterpret things. Let us look this morning at some of the illusions of life.

1. Sometimes, in face of the hardships of life, we cry out -- "This is CRUELTY", just as the Moabites cried out -- "That's blood!" There are experiences which come to every one of us which seem to bear the bitter marks of cruelty: The racking pain of incurable disease; the sudden accident which leaves someone in a wheelchair for life; the death of a little child, or of someone who means more to you than life itself. There are the crushing blows of disappointment.

A mother with a severely handicapped child said to me once, "God is cruel, isn't He?" I remember thinking, as a little boy of eight, when my Dad died, "Why me, God? Why did You have to take my Dad?" And I miss him to this day. But I came to believe a long time ago that the Lord had a ministry for him to perform in heaven that he could never have undertaken here on earth -- perhaps the ministry of intercession. And when I look at his picture, as I often do, I say, "Lord, help me to be like my Dad", and that is a challenge and an inspiration.

At first glance it would seem that some fiend sits on the throne of the universe, whose delight it is to torture us. We are tempted to become bitter and cynical. But all the time, could we only see it aright, we might find that the seeming cruelty of things was caused by the sun shining upon the waters of your river of life! God moves in a mysterious way; and one of the triumphs of faith is to

interpret the seeming cruelties of life as the infinite kindness and goodness of a God of love.

Henry R. Luce was founder and editor-in-chief of Time and Life magazines, and was, incidentally, an elder in the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. His wife, Clare Booth Luce, became, perhaps, even more famous than her illustrious husband. Many years ago they lost their daughter through tragic death, and Mrs. Luce was quite inconsolable. About two weeks after the funeral Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, the famous T.V. preacher, phoned Mrs. Luce to say that he had learned of their deep grief, and wished to offer his sincere sympathy. He added that if she felt he could be of any spiritual assistance to her, she was to phone him, and he would be glad to counsel with her. After a time Mrs. Luce did seek an interview with the Bishop, and as she entered his study, she exclaimed, almost in defiance, "Why did God take my daughter from me?" Looking her straight in the eye and without a moment's hesitation, Sheen replied, "Mrs. Luce, it is quite possible that God took your daughter in order to save your soul!" The arrow struck home, and the ensuing conversation represented the beginning of a quest which led that brilliant woman to a new and unfading realization of the love of God in Christ.

You see, it's not what life does to us that really matters; it's how we react; it's our interpretation of what happens that is crucially important. Remember, the same sun that melts ice also hardens clay. So always pray, when trials come, that God will melt your heart, and reveal His great love for you, rather than allow that heart to become hardened. The melted heart is the secret of victory over adversity.

2. Again, in face of some of the happenings of life, we cry out -- "This is MEANINGLESS". We are sometimes tempted to think that we are the playthings of chance, pawns in a fiendish game. "Has life any real meaning at all?" we ask. "Why in a wild storm, are gallant men in a lifeboat allowed to lose their lives as they go, messengers of mercy, to rescue the crew of a stricken vessel? Why in a world war, was the cream of the young manhood of almost every nation allowed to be slaughtered? It all seems so meaningless -- such a waste!

We recall Studdert Kennedy's grim poem entitled, "War":

"Waste of muscle, waste of brain;
Waste of patience, waste of pain;
Waste of manhood, waste of health;
Waste of beauty, waste of wealth;
Waste of blood, and waste of tears;
Waste of youth's most precious years;
Waste of ways the saints have trod;
Waste of glory, waste of God!"

And yet -- what makes the lifeboat crew go out?

What makes the soldier go to his death? What makes a 19-year-old soldier on Iwo Jima fling himself on a live grenade, losing his own life in order to save his buddies? It is that eternal moral value called DUTY.

The story is told of a young fellow who had just become a member of a lifeboat crew on the East Coast of England. On the night of a dreadful storm in the North Sea, as the men gathered at the lifeboat station to launch their craft to go out to a vessel in distress, the young chap exclaimed, "Do we have to go out in this gale? Over the roar of the sea an old member of the crew shouted grimly, "Yes, son, we have to go out, but we don't have to come back!"

When we reflect upon the most cherished moral values of life, what seems meaningless can become very meaningful.

Many years ago, before the advent of the automobile, a man was walking one day with a friend in the dales of Yorkshire in England. He was from the city, but his companion was a man of the countryside. As they climbed a steep hill, the gentleman noticed stones the size of bricks lying in the road. To him they seemed both meaningless and dangerous, and he made to kick them into the grass on the side of the hill, as one removes orange peel from the footpath. But to his amazement he found that they were embedded in the surface of the road. His friend, seeing his perplexity, smiled and said, "They are there for a purpose. They have been placed there to ease the horses, and help them keep their feet as they strain with their load up the hill!"

A stumbling-stone was really a stepping-stone! We are tempted to doubt the love and care of God. May it not be that what we think is meaningless is really the shining of the sun upon the waters?

3. Finally, there comes the hour when we whisper, "This is DEATH". From time immemorial, in the ancient classics and in the modern hymn, death has been compared to a river. And the human heart is instinctively afraid of that old river with its cold, sullen waves. Who is there who has not felt an icy grip upon his heart as, in a quiet hour, he has reflected upon his departure from this earthly life? And yet, hasn't the terror of death been swallowed up since Jesus came and died and rose again?

Dr. Peter Marshall used to tell about a little boy he knew once, an only son who was ill with an incurable disease. Month after month his mother had tenderly nursed him, read to him, and played with him, hoping to keep him from realizing the terrible finality of the doctor's diagnosis. But as the weeks went by, and he grew no better,

the little fellow gradually began to understand that he would never be like the other boys he saw playing outside his window, and small as he was, he began to understand the meaning of the term "death", and he, too, knew that he was to die.

Once day his mother had been reading to him the stirring tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, and of that last glorious battle in which so many brave knights met their death. As she closed the book, the boy sat silent for a moment as though deeply stirred by what he had heard; and then he asked the question which had been haunting him for weeks, "Mummy, what is it like to die? Mummy, does it hurt?" Quick tears sprang to her eyes, and she fled to the kitchen supposedly to tend to something on the stove. She knew it was a question with deep significance, and she knew it must be answered satisfactorily. So she leaned for a moment against the kitchen cabinet, and breathed a hurried prayer that the Lord would keep her from breaking down before her son and would tell her how to answer him.

And the Lord did tell her. Immediately she knew how to explain it to him. "Kenneth", she said, as she returned to the sick room, "you remember when you were a tiny boy, how you used to play so hard all day that when night came, you would be too tired even to undress, and you would tumble into mother's bed and fall asleep? That wasn't your bed; it wasn't where you belonged. And you would only stay there for a little while. In the morning, much to your surprise, you would wake up and find yourself in your own bed in your own room. You were there because someone loved you and had taken care of you. Your Daddy had come with big strong arms and carried you away. Kenneth, death is just like that. We just wake up some morning and find ourselves in the other room, our room where we belong, because the Lord Jesus loved us. And that room of ours is called 'heaven.'"

The lad's shining, trusting face looking up into hers told her that the point had gone home and that there would be no more fear, only love and trust in his heart as we went to meet Jesus. He never questioned again, and several weeks later he fell asleep just as she had said.

That is surely what death is like for a Christian. And yet it seems almost too good to be true, and we mistake the sunshine for blood!

We can offer no cheap or easy solutions for the myriad problems, heartaches and mysteries of life; but this much each of us can utter as our confession of faith:

"My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me;
I cannot choose the colours He weaveth steadily.

Oft times He weaveth sorrow, and I, in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper and I the under side.
Not till the loom is silent, and the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why
The dark threads are as needful in the Weaver's skillful Hand
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned."

St. Paul reminds us that "all things" (not just some things; not just pleasant things) but "all things work together for good to those who love God." In our moments of frustration, suffering and grief, you may be tempted to say --

"This is cruelty;"
"This is meaningless;"
"This is death."

But ah no! It is not that at all -- it is just the shining of the sun upon the waters!

Amen!